

# The Long Swim

All summer a pregnant humpback whale feeds in the cold, clear waters off the coast of Alaska. Every day she eats two tons of food, adding more fat to the layer of blubber under her skin. Blubber protects her from the cold and, because it's lighter than water, helps keep her enormous bulk afloat. But there is another reason she needs to put on tons of blubber. It is her food store, and she is about to leave on a 3,000-mile journey to waters where she will find nothing to eat for many months. She is swimming warm tropical waters near the Hawaiian Islands, where she mated a year ago. She is returning now to give birth. A newborn calf could not survive the icy cold Alaskan winter.

The humpback is huge. She is longer than a school bus and weighs 35 tons. But she preys on some of the smallest inhabitants of the sea world—tiny shrimplike creatures called krill.

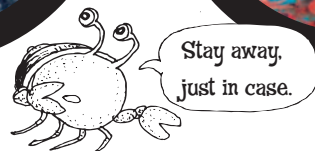
## Big Gulp

To feed, she opens her mouth wide, taking in hundreds of gallons of water in a single gulp. A humpback whale has no teeth. Instead, attached to its upper jaw are rows of long, thin fingernail-like material called baleen. Each piece of baleen is about three feet long and has bristles at its end that act like

a strainer. After the whale takes in a mouthful of water, it forces the water out through the baleen with its tongue, trapping thousands of krill inside its mouth.



Enormous humpbacks eat tiny krill by catching them in strands of baleen.





Welcome to Hawaii,  
little guy.

A humpback and her baby travel together on the long journey.

## On the Move

Shorter days and cooling water are signals that it is time for the female humpback to leave. She follows roughly the same route each year, traveling with two or three other females, some accompanied by their youngsters. The males will be waiting to welcome the females to the Hawaiian waters with their eerie, haunting mating songs, which they sing for hours as they hang upside down in the water.

## Big Baby

The humpback takes from six weeks to two months to complete her journey. Soon after she reaches the breeding grounds, she gives birth. Her calf is 14 feet long and weighs more than a ton. Right away, it knows how to swim,

but because it's a mammal, it cannot breathe underwater. Its first need is fresh air. The mother humpback quickly lifts her baby to the water's surface to get its first breath. Soon it is breathing on its own, swimming back to the surface every two or three minutes.

The baby's other need is food—and then still more food. It has to build up a thick layer of blubber to keep it warm when it returns to the cold waters in the north. The calf nurses underwater, drinking 100 gallons of its mother's rich milk a day. The calf gains weight quickly—nearly 50 pounds each day.

## Homeward Bound

Finally, spring comes, and the calf is big enough to return with its mother to the feeding grounds in the far north, where the cold water swarms with nutritious krill. For almost six months, the mother whale has had nothing to eat. She has lost half her weight and is hungry. She sets off, with her baby swimming close to her side like a shadow. Other mothers and calves join them. They swim and swim, nursing their babies along the way. It is just the first of many migrations for the young calves. But they'll be back again next year—and the next.

**Adapted from an article by Margaret J. Anderson**